

Overcrowding Solution Presented by Williams

By SUSANNA SHOHAM

School Superintendent Eileen Williams proposed a fourth solution to the overcrowding problems at Duxbury Junior Senior High School at last week's school committee meeting. A study committee consisting of principals, teachers, town officials and parents had previously recommended 3 different alternatives.

Williams recommended renovating the Lower Alden School to house grades 3-4, and moving grades 7-8 from DJSHS to the Duxbury Elementary School (DES), which would then contain grades 5-8. Williams also recommended moving the Magic Dragon public daycare program at DES to the junior senior high school and renovating the space it used into five classrooms.

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The estimated cost of renovating Lower Alden and DES is \$1.7 million, said Williams, adding that she expected this preliminary figure could be lower. This amount could be funded within the town's levy limit, preventing the need for a Proposition 2 1/2 override at a town election. Williams said that if her plan is chosen and funding for it is provided by Special Town Meeting in the fall that construction could begin immediately. The renovated space would be available for September 1997 when there will no longer be enough room at the junior senior high school for grades 7-12, which is already at its capacity of 1,225 students.

"My recommendation places a priority on keeping grades 7 and 8 together," Williams said, reading from a prepared statement that she said will be sent to all parents.

Williams' plan differs from all of the 3 solutions presented to the school committee by the 15-member study committee four weeks ago. Plan 1 proposes moving grades 7-8 to DES and grades 3-5 to a rebuilt Lower Alden, and at a cost of \$3.9 million, plan 1 is the most expensive option. Plan 2 suggests moving 7-8 grades to a rebuilt Lower Alden, for \$3.4 million. Plan 3 recommends moving grade 7 to DES and grades 3-4 to a rebuilt or renovated Lower Alden. It would cost \$2.5 million.

All these figures represent the town's share after state reimbursements, which pay 67% and take about 6 years, said Williams. To fund the two proposals that require rebuilding the Lower Alden school, which was closed as a school in 1992 to save money during a budget crunch, the town would have to raise the full amount, \$11.8 million for plan 1 and \$10.2 million for plan 2, and then wait for the state money. Raising these funds would require Proposition 2 1/2 overrides.

Selectman Chairman James Murphy said the town's current total amount of debt of \$10 million would double if either of these projects are approved.

About these plans, Williams said: "I am very concerned that if we spend the resources to fund either of these alternatives there will be little left to fund staffing and expenses, not just for the new school, but for the entire system. We can provide a quality program in adequate facilities and we are doing so now. But it

would be disastrous to succeed in having excellent facilities and a poor program due to inadequate resources. Teachers, staff, adequate materials and professional development are far more important to the quality of education than the facilities."

Another concern Williams had about these options was that they would take too long. She projected that construction of a new school for either grades 3-4 or 7-8 would not be complete until September 2000, three years after the target date set to relieve the overcrowding.

Despite the lower costs and speed of Williams' plan, it is not without some flaws. First, Williams said space will be tight at DES for 3 years with the addition of grades 7-8, until enrollment begins to ease up as the projections indicate. Williams said that she believed that keeping 7th and 8th grades together, which the school faculty has said is essential for instructional, social and developmental reasons, is worth the tight squeeze in space for 3 years.

A second difficulty is that Lower Alden will not have enough space for a library. Williams felt a solution ~~saithne collections in the classrooms or using the DES library or the expanded public library.~~

Another issue raised by William's plan is the effect the deletion of 8th graders will have on the high school athletic program, specifically the user fees and sports offered.

Some school committee members and parents attending the meeting raised concerned about Williams' plan.

"I perceive this is just moving our overcrowding problem (at DJSHS) across the street," said school committee member Linda Smith. "I just don't see it as ideal."

"And I don't see it as ideal," said Williams, who stressed that her plan had no guarantees.

Smith said she favors plan 1, moving grades 7-8 to DES and grades 3-5 to a rebuilt Lower Alden for \$3.9 million in three years. "I'd be willing to put up with the disruption knowing that you're going to make it right in the end," she said.

Resident Karen Gomer of Pine St. asked Williams about her plan's space squeeze at DES: "How tight is tight? We're asking the town to spend \$1.7 million and we'll still be overcrowded. Are we looking at everything? It seems to me we're rushing to put a band-aid on something and we're going to spring a leak somewhere else."

"I would love to be able to fix it (overcrowding) forever, but it's not going to happen," said school committee member Betsy Sullivan.

Selectmen Margaret Kearney told the school committee: "My advice to you is you should pick (a plan) that the whole town can buy into."

School committee member agreed to decide on a solution at their June 19 meeting.